

Student Athletes' Perception of Female Models in Sports Advertisements

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Abstract

Women in advertisements are no longer portrayed as having traditional roles. Instead, they are portrayed as dominant and powerful. This new marketing strategy is hoped to be more persuasive in reaching the target audience, especially the female buyers, thus increasing the sales in the market. This qualitative research aims to explore student-athletes' views on the portrayal of female models in sports advertisements. A focus group interview involving three female student-athletes was conducted. A total of 20 advertisements, which portray female models, from five leading sports brands were used as stimuli for the focus group. The findings reveal that the participants have different perceptions towards the body image and athletic values of the advertisements, despite having the same background as a student athlete. Sexual appeal, the portrayal of healthy and positive body image, and strong athletic ability are among the functions of the female models in the advertisements, as perceived by the participants.

Keywords: advertisement, sports, athletes, focus group, gender studies

1. Introduction

Female models and spokespersons are common in many types of advertising. In the early years, advertisements portrayed women as a housewife and a mother (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971). Early researchers also mention that women were portrayed in traditional and decorative roles, which suggests that their capability was less highlighted (Sexton & Haberman, 1974; Lysonski, 1983; Skorek & Schreier, 2009). Gender stereotype in advertising is mainly to generalize and simplify meaning behind a particular group of people and to fit the beliefs and needs of the bigger community or culture. Skorek and Schreier (2009) outline the different types of gender roles in the light of working, non working, functional and dominance. They suggest that there are standardized female and male traits to be portrayed in advertisements and if the actors do not adhere to the respective gender traits, he or she has breached the gender codes and roles.

Sports advertisements are mostly dominated by male models. Although there is a wide range of female sports products in the market, advertisers and sports brands prefer male athletes in advertising the products. They believe that male models or male athletes can better represent the sports products because the public pays more attention to male athletes compared to female athletes. Apart from that, the representation of women in sports advertisements also tends to have sexual and objectified criteria (Hillard, 1984). Gender stereotyping in advertisements may lead to the misconception of gendercasting and narrowcasting (Brown, 2013). This situation in the long run would affect female and male roles in certain fields, especially sports, in the real world. It also affects the audience and consumers in terms of expectations, attitude towards female sports, manufacturing and sales.

Gender stereotyping in advertisements began to be challenged during the post feminism era. The equality of the role of women in the society started to be accepted by the majority. Women portrayal in advertising has evolved from traditional role to non-traditional role (Belkaoui & Belkaoui, 1976; Plakoyiannaki & Zotos, 2009). The advancement of technology, perception and role of advertising have changed the landscape of gender advertising. Previously, women or female models in advertising were portrayed as being dependent to the male characters.

These days, women in advertising are portrayed in their profession, engaged in activities that take place outside of the house setting and are sometimes portrayed as equal as the men. Women are not only portrayed as family-oriented, but involve in other settings that represent modern era. They are portrayed as dynamic, powerful and having motivational values. This study aims to explore student athletes' opinions and perception towards the representation of women in sports advertisements.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study applied focus group method. Three female student athletes were purposively chosen to take part in this study. The age of the participants is between 19-22 years old. A total of 20 advertisements were used as stimuli for the focus group. These advertisements were obtained from the top five sports brand websites: Nike, Adidas, Puma, Reebok and Under Armour. The brands were chosen because they are listed as the most well-known sports brands in the market (Schwartz, 2010). Each of the advertisement portrays one female model, logo of the brand and slogans.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Visual image is a symbol that communicates meaning and has effects on the audience. It conveys not only artistic values but also meaningful messages that need to be interpreted by the audience. Rashid et al. (2016) and Adlina and Normah (2016) state that images help to facilitate visual communication because audience can relate the images with the message that the advertisements intend to express. Print advertisements with images are useful in persuading and attracting the target audience. Below are some of the interesting views shared by the participants during the focus group.

3.1 Perception towards Body Image

When they first saw the picture, all three of them said that they like the picture. For them, sports advertisements with female models are different, unique and inspirational. However, when they were asked to examine the picture more closely, their early perception changed. Somehow they felt that the advertisement has more sexual appeal except for Advertisement 5. They began to notice that at least two models in the two separate advertisements have been manipulated for sexual appeal. The participants mentioned that the sexual appeal can be observed from their attire, facial expression and body posture.

Another participant stated that some of the female models' postures are not culturally appropriate. In addition, the focus of the picture is not on the sports elements but more on the models' sexy body - *The way she bends her body, her legs..things like that. For me it is a very sexy pose.*

However, on the positive side, the participants stated that the models look fit and healthy. This is suitable for them since they are representing sports attire and products. They also mentioned that the body image presented by the models is not like other typical fashion models which are normally skinny.

They look fit and healthy. They also look energetic. When girls like us see this picture...we feel that this is the type of body that we want to achieve.

3.2 Perception towards the Portrayal of Athletic Ability

When the participants were asked to guess about the type of sports that the female models represent, all three of them only managed to give two correct answers out of five.

She must be a kick boxer, because she wears kickboxing pants. And she is in the kickboxing ring. Am I right?

The response highlighted above refers to Adidas advertisement that features Laila Ali, a daughter of well known boxer, Muhammad Ali. She is in her female kickboxing attire. She is also pictured in a kickboxing ring, thus the elements in the advertisement signify the sport that she represents.

I think this model represents basketball, because she is holding the ball...the basket ball.

The above statement is the feedback for Adidas advertisement which portrays Skylar Diggins, a professional basketball player from the United States. In the advertisement, Diggins is shown in sports attire and she is holding a basket ball. However, the background setting is empty and the advertisement only focuses on the model. As she is clearly shown with a basket ball, it is clear to the participants that she is a basket ball player.

Both Ali and Diggins are not professional models. They are professional athletes endorsed by certain sports brands for promotional purposes. As they are well-known in their professional sports, the advertisements that they are featured in contain the elements that signify their profession. It is clearly represented, thus the participants in this study were able to relate the advertisements with their real profession and athletic ability.

The models in the other three advertisements are not professional athletes. Instead, they are fashion models that are paid to be in the advertisements. Thus, they do not represent any type of sports in specific. Their appearance in the advertisement is to promote the sports products and the brands they represent.

Puma advertisement that portrays Kylie Jenner for instance, does not represent specific sports but to promote Swan Pack, a new sportswear collection for female by the brand. From the advertisement, participants can clearly see the pants, the singlet and shoes from Puma Swan Pack Collection.

I am not sure about the athletic values from this advertisement. But I think the advertisement is about the product. Maybe the shoes?

The statement is the feedback from a participant who is unsure about the product. A model in another advertisement also does not represent athletic ability. The model wears casual attire but the focus is on the sports shoes that she is wearing.

I think this one is to promote sport footwear for women. More on the shoes...If it's not because of the shoes, I don't know that this is sports advertisement.

The participants stated that although they can easily spot the brand name and the slogan that describe the comfort of the footwear, the model does not represent athletic ability. The female model is suggestively bending over touching the shoes she is wearing and a casual short dress indicates that she is going for a leisure walk outside. However, the participants agreed that it is not necessary for the brand to portray athletic ability of the model as long as the model represents sports products.

I think it's subjective. As long as it is related to sports products, for me it's relevant. Like this model, they are not professional athletes, but they are wearing the sports shoes, pants and this latest products by the brand. It's relevant.

4. Conclusion

This paper explores the perception of female university student athletes on the portrayal of female models in sports advertising. The findings show the participants have positive and negative views of the portrayal. When they refer to the body image, some of them have positive perceptions, saying that the models promote healthy lifestyle and healthy image. They appreciate that the models are not skinny as in other fashion advertisements. However, the models are also perceived to promote sexual appeal and inappropriate to the local culture.

In regards to the portrayal of athletic ability in sports advertisements, the participants are able to match some of the advertisements with the athletic ability of the female models portrayed. Some of the advertisements use female professional athletes thus it is relevant to portray their athletic ability by featuring the elements of the sports that they engaged in. However, there are also other sports advertisements that do not portray professional athletes thus athletic ability of the models are not required in the advertisement. In conclusion, the findings suggest that healthy body image is necessary in sports advertising as it develops positive perception among the target audience. Apart from that, in Malaysian context, some audience may feel uncomfortable with the models who wear revealing sports attire although the intention is to promote the sports products instead of sexual appeal.

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